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## **“It’s sport, why does it matter?” Professional coaches’ perceptions of equity training**

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to stimulate debate as to the current value and form of equity training for UK coaches and how it impacts coaching practice. Adopting a critical feminist lens, it was contended that when equity is ideologically framed as access, legislation and opportunity, the possibilities that coaches will benefit from this component of the coaching curricula are reduced. The discussions are based on in-depth interviews with four coaches who had recently attended the ‘Equity in your Coaching’ workshop run by Sports Coach UK. Data analysis yielded four pertinent themes related to: coaches’ language; the impact of the course on becoming a reflective practitioner; the format of the workshop; and the minimal impact on coaching practice. Through undergoing this training, coaches understood the value and worth of such education. However, in its current form, the workshop was experienced as irrelevant and too removed from practice to be of worth to these coaches. Action is required to transform the content to increase its impact on coach learning and subsequent practice. The findings also illustrate the need for coach developers to more adequately understand the complexities and intricacies inherent within the coaching context.

## **Introduction**

Aside from the technical and tactical role of the coach, the emerging understanding of the moral function of coaches is that s/he remains pertinent at all levels of athletic performance towards establishing notions of 'fair play' and 'respect' within sport and physical activity (DePoy & Gitlin, 2005). Within the UK, through recent governmental drives to professionalise the role, coaches now have the remit to widen participation, enhance social cohesion and promote inclusion through the manner in which they deliver and practice coaching (Sport England, 2016). In light of a burgeoning body of research that is critical of the current state of UK coach education, the question remains whether there is sufficient and adequate education to support coaches to be such agents of social inclusion despite the considerable investment in coach education provision over the last few years (Lyle, 2007). Presently, coaching knowledge is constructed around rationalistic and mechanistic ideas that do not always enable coaches to become problem solvers, critical and reflective practitioners, or able to understand coaching as a social, pedagogical, relational endeavour that is a constituent of the sociocultural context in which it occurs (Piggott, 2012). Research shows that this has had limited impact on coaching practice (Chesterfield, Potrac, & Jones, 2010; Mesquita, Ribeiro, Santos, & Morgan, 2014; Piggott, 2012; Stoszkowski & Collins, 2017). Despite the issues apparent in coach education, there is still a need for critical educational structures to drive coaching forward and develop thoughtful and reflexive coaches. More knowledge is needed too as to how coaches experience the various components of their coaching curriculum as the research field itself is one still in its infancy (Chesterfield et al., 2010; Piggott, 2015; Stoszkowski & Collins, 2017). While much has been written on the subject of evaluating coach education programmes and workshops, we need to understand more as to how coaches experience such training (Jones & Allison, 2014). Therefore, the focus of the present study was to examine whether one of the few components of the UK coaching curriculum that does seek to provide sociocultural education for coaches, that is the workshop 'Equity in Your Coaching', was effective in stimulating how

coaches conceive social issues and to gauge understanding of how this may have impacted coaching practice with different social groups. This builds upon previous work in this area that critically examined how issues of equality are ideologically framed by sporting organisations, to address more explicitly the coaches' experience of the workshop and its impact on their day-to-day role (author, 2015).

Using a feminist cultural studies standpoint, the case is made that while gender and related equity issues lie at the heart of coaching practice, such issues are mismanaged and underestimated by policy makers, coach educators and coaches alike. I make the case, through a feminist lens, that the intellectual apparatus of coach education, the concepts, vocabulary and theories within the equity training course, do not adequately address (gender) equality and instead perpetuates the view that white, middle class, able-bodied men are constructed as 'us' and other social groups are constructed as 'them'. It was examined whether the impact of this type of coach education, equity training, ideologically informed by how the educational provider framed gender equality, challenged or reproduced male and female coaches' understanding and practice towards 'difference', equity and equality in their relations with their male and female athletes. The purpose of this is to build our broader understanding of equality in sport and what are some of the features or ways in which inequality is made evident within sport and coaching whilst understanding the meanings ascribed to equity by practitioners.

## **Background**

To reiterate, as part of the professionalisation of coaching in the UK, practitioners are seen as agents of social inclusion and coaching as a means of enhancing participation (Sport England, 2016). This paradigm shift in the reconceptualisation and professionalisation of the role of the coach is due in part to the increase in pressure on sporting organisations as a result of the recent Equality Act (2010), the anti-discrimination law for Great Britain, which covers all 'protected characteristics', including sexual orientation, (dis)ability, race, sex,

gender / gender reassignment, and religion or belief (including lack of belief) (Burgess, Edwards, & Skinner, 2003; Dowling, Edwards, & Washington, 2014). This systemic pressure on sports organisations (i.e. change initiated by government) means these bodies have a greater legislative accountability and responsibility towards making their sport more equitable, including educating their (coaching) workforce to be sensitive and knowledgeable about equity issues, and to create inclusive, accessible environments for all their participants (Dowling et al., 2014). The shift in the conceptualisation of coaches is also due to the change in how sport is seen more broadly: as a vehicle for social change, a fundamental human right and a tool for social as well as personal development (Ladda, 2014; Sport England, 2016). Towards this, coaches are taught how to facilitate this through the 'Equity in your Coaching' workshop, a component of the professional development programme for coaches in the UK that addresses issues of equity, equality and diversity within coaching practice. These terms are defined within the handbook for the workshop using the Sports Council as well as Sports Coach UK's understanding of these terms in relation to coaching. For the purpose of the workshop, equity is defined as:

Fairness in sport, equality of access, recognizing inequalities and taking steps to address them. It is about changing the culture and structure of sport to ensure that it becomes equally accessible to everyone in society (Sports Council, 1993, p.4).

Equality was defined by Sports Coach UK as:

The state of being equal – treating individuals equally, which does not necessarily mean treating people the same. In some cases, the need for equality may require unequal effort, to ensure the principle of equality is achieved (Sports Coach UK, 2009, p.1).

Underpinning this workshop as well as other policies and interventions towards making sport more equitable, is a particular ideological framework that scaffolds how organisations and governing bodies envision, frame, and address equality. Most sporting organisations and governing bodies have endeavoured to make their sports more inclusive through what Brackenridge (2001) and Ely and Meyerson (2000) describe as a 'creating

equal opportunities' ideological framework. This approach to improving equality and diversity endeavours to treat everyone the same (Bagilhole, 2009), and entails focusing upon the structural barriers preventing minority groups from accessing sports participation and leadership roles. The workshops, provided by Sports Coach UK - the central coaching agency, are held throughout the UK and aim to educate coaches as to how to identify and deal with any barriers to participation for specific social groups. In particular, BME communities, women, people with (dis)ability, economically disadvantaged individuals, sexual minorities, and different faith-based groups. The workshops also aim to help coaches to understand how to interpret the legislation relating to equality for their clubs and practice, and develop methods to make coaching sessions more accessible to all their athletes. This training is a one-off seminar and is taught using group discussion, didactic methods, and practical exercises. Until 2011, at least one coach from every community sports clubs was required to undertake equity workshop in order for the club to receive its 'Clubmark' award. This is Sport England's national accreditation scheme for high quality community sports clubs that recognises high club standards of welfare, equity, coaching and management. This requirement has since been removed by Sport England and the workshop is no longer mandatory for UK coaches. Thus, despite a drive for inclusion, equality and even respect, how it is intended to help coaches to be agents of social inclusion is unclear. It is therefore necessary to speculate as to whether the matter of educating coaches on issues of equity, equality and diversity within the UK has lost its momentum or at least, become hidden in a wider agenda. As coach educators and sport policy makers look forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and endeavour to have a body of athletes more numerous than ever before, it is likely that athletes will be increasingly different in backgrounds from one another and from their coaches. In addition to this, despite coaching agency and governing body drives to attract and train a more diverse coaching workforce in recognition that coaches tend to be from a certain demographic, it is likely that coaches will continue to be male, Caucasian, able-bodied and middle-class, with backgrounds and life experiences very different from the athletes they are expected to coach.

### **Theoretical position**

To change how sporting organisations conceive issues of equity, equality and diversity and to put a greater focus on social justice within the coaching curricula may prove to a significant task. Sport has historically and remains even today, an inequitable institution. As part of this, sport has been well-documented as a gendered institution, that is, meanings, identities, organisational practices and processes of control and action are distinguished between / for men and women (Acker, 1990). The current ethos of 'equal opportunities' that underpins UK sporting council and national governing body approaches to equity means that gender is conceptualised as differences between men and women resulting from different structural opportunities and resources (Sibley, Harré, Hovard, & Houkamau, 2011). As a consequence, while there are many credible interventions targeted towards attracting women into sports participation and coaching, the beliefs that legitimate gendered inequality in sport remain unproblematised (Sibley et al., 2011). But where do we start if we want to understand how gender and other inequalities play out within sports organisations? One way is to start with the cultural symbols and messages within sport and coaching, and relevant to the present study, in the educational resources and teaching for coaches in the area of social justice as one form of such symbols and messaging. These symbols exemplify organisations' visions for equality and the approach to achieving that vision. What is of interest here is how these patterns and practices might shape coaches' understanding of gender and their negotiation of such issues in their coaching contexts.

Equity training for coaches provides the model and determines our understanding of, what equality is and should be. Herein, lies the worth and value of adopting a critical feminist position to interrogate how is this education modelled, framed, and indeed how does it influence coaching knowledge and practice. An important part of the broader feminist project, as mentioned briefly at the beginning of this paper, is to unpack and understand what (in)equality is in sport, its features and how it shows itself. One evident way is in how

equity and equality is taught, in this case to coaches, and the cultural messages, symbols, and images attached to it. From analysis of the equity training educational resources made available to coaches, it appears such materials embody a masculine and male orientated profession and indeed, institution. Images and messages serve to construct an 'us' (white, able-bodied, heterosexual, middle class male coaches) and 'them' (any other social groups that do not fit this hegemonic group) divide. Coaches are taught how to attract such 'minorities' into their coaching, how to make their sessions more 'accessible' and engaging in order to attract more of a diverse participant base (Sports Coach UK, 2009). No part of this component of coach education requires coaches to question who they are, or indeed, the institutionalised male power on which sporting organisations and governing bodies are built. Part of the focus of the present study is then to understand how such messages impact coaches understanding of equity and their practices with their athletes. Some indication of the beliefs and values of a sporting organisation can then be gained through understanding the daily practices and experiences of its coaches. While gender equity formed the primary focus of the research, an intersectional perspective of 'difference' was also considered and so other relations of power including race, religion and sexual orientation were also addressed. This provides the focus of present paper: What are professional coaches' perceptions of the 'equity training for coaching' workshop for how it impacts learning and practice?

### **Methodology**

In order to collect the coaches' narratives and foreground their ideas and experiences, in-depth semi-structured interviews were chosen as an effective method to accomplish this (Cresswell, 2014). Additionally, the study endeavoured to include those coaches who had the most sustained, regular contact with their athletes and governing body so that they could discuss and relate their coaching experiences to the organisation in which they worked. This was because coaches who practiced more frequently were more likely to be able to discuss the impact of this learning on their practices. With this in mind, the



findings were collected on the experiences of professional coaches, that is, men and women who were paid on at least a part-time basis to coach and who regularly practiced. The coaches were from various performance domains and stage of qualification. Recruitment for the research was targeted towards coaches from any sporting context, i.e. any individual or team sports, as it was understood that the number of coaches who are paid to do so and who attend equity training represented a low number. In order to recruit participants, Sports Coach UK, at the request of the researcher, distributed an advert for the study to all the coaches who had attended one of their county-based equity training workshops in the last three months. The rationale for this was that participant coaches would be recruited who had recently engaged and reflected upon equity issues within their practice, so that their experience of the workshop would be the most up-to-date.

Prior to the research, formal ethical approval was provided by the University's ethics committee and all research was carried out in accordance with the University's ethical guidelines. Following this approval, the recruitment advert for the study was then disseminated by Sports Coach UK to workshop attendees (the number of coaches who had participated in the workshop in the last three months was not made known to the researcher). Possible participants received information about the nature of the research and an invitation to take part. From this, four professional coaches contacted the researcher and agreed to share their experiences of the equity training workshop. This number is representative of a small possible pool of participants but such a sample size had little bearing to the purpose of the study which broadly speaking, was to stimulate debate and conversation as to the current value and form of equity training for coaches, rather than provide an absolute truth as to the state of this education (McLeod, 1997). Nonetheless, the low number of participants, while not detracting from the data or study, is an interesting finding itself. With only four coaches offering their participation, this is perhaps indicative of the value ascribed to this component of their coaching curriculum and their perceptions towards the anticipated impact on their practice in light of their already held beliefs that they understand and practice equitably (author, 2015).

Prior to meeting, the coaches were sent additional letters of information detailing the research study and were requested to complete a participant consent form. Interviews were conducted with all four coaches at a time and location (home or place of work) convenient to the participant. The four coaches included in the study each represented a different sport and were at different levels of the UK Coaching Certificate (UKCC). The UKCC, managed by Sports Coach UK, is a national framework for coaching qualifications, ranging from level one (assistant coach) to level four (master coaches) (Sports Coach UK, 2010). Table 1 profiles each of the four coaches, referred to using a pseudonym to protect anonymity and confidentiality as much as is possible for small sample-based research. These pseudonyms are then utilised throughout the paper.

\*INSERT TABLE 1 HERE\*

The purpose of the interviews with the participant coaches was to have an open discussion concerning their experiences of the 'Equity in your Coaching' workshop and for their assessment of how it has impacted, if at all, their approach to their coaching of equity issues. However, a semi-structured interview guide, devised for the purpose of the research, was used to structure the discussion. The guide primarily focused on (1) the participants' background in and early experiences of coaching, (2) philosophies and practices of the coach in regards to gender and equity, (3) the participants' experiences of gender in coaching, and (4) how equity training had impacted the participants' understanding and practices regarding gender equity, and (4) the coaches' evaluation of organisational support for their professional practices related to gender equity. Participants were also asked to elaborate extra, relevant information that arose during the course of the interview. Each interview lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. All interviews were digitally recorded and data analysed using the constant comparison method of data coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This involved unitising each interview transcript into smaller units of meaning. Participant responses to each interview question comprised a unit. Each unit of meaning devised in the preparation stage was then compared across other units of meaning, and was then clustered

with similar units to form an over-arching category. When a unit of meaning did not share similar meanings with another, it formed a new category. Rules of inclusion that formed the basis for each category were written and joined to similar categories to show relationships and patterns across the data. During this stage, it was also important to seek the trustworthiness of the participants. Olesen (2000) states that feminist qualitative researchers will seek to ensure their work is credible using “member validation techniques” (p. 230). This position remains in feminist research even today (Brisolara, Seigart, & SenGupta, 2014). It provides participants the opportunity to correct, improve and further discuss previously collected data (Caretta, 2016). Within the present study, each of the four coaches was provided with a copy of their own transcribed interview. Respondent validation also allows a more active role for the participant within the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Nevertheless, it is understood that even this strategy adds another layer of co-construction between the researcher and the participants because essentially it is a technique situated within a realist ontological position and therefore, is concerned with knowing the ‘truth’ (Braun & Clarke, 2013). For this reason, member ‘reflections’ on the transcript was adopted as a technique (Tracy, 2010). On receipt and examination of the interview transcripts, none of the participants requested any changes.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Four of the themes that emerged from the data analysis related to the coaches’ experience of the equity training workshop they received. These themes were: language and terminology; the impact of the course on becoming a reflective practitioner; the format of the workshop as inapplicable and uninspiring; and the minimal impact on coaching practice. These themes highlight how the coaches struggled to link the application and relevancy of equity training, in its current form, to coaching practice and therefore improved athletic performance.

## THE IMPACT OF THE COURSE ON COACHES' LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY

The strength of the workshop for all four of the four coaches was in highlighting what appropriate language and terminology to utilise whilst coaching and engaging with their athletes. For three of the coaches this was because they had coached for so long or as individuals who had started coaching as older adults, without any form of sociocultural education, that they acknowledged that their language could be described as 'out of date'. For all of the coaches, the course increased their awareness of how they communicated in general, with others in their coaching contexts. For Robert in particular, who had played badminton for many years but had only taken up coaching as an older adult, the equity workshop was a revelation in making him realise his language needed to change:

One of the things that profoundly shook me about the course was the vocabulary, and how out of date I was with the vocabulary...it really dawned [on me], there was actually a section on the course about vocabulary...and I was hopelessly out of date I think with my vocabulary... to be reminded that my vocabulary was out of date [I would say was good].

For Stuart, his primary occupation within a male-dominated environment meant his language, by his own admission, was often not appropriate when working with young athletes and could be, at times, deemed sexist. However, by attending the course, he had reflected upon this and realised this needed to change:

I mean one of the things I had to kind of really reign in, I suppose...your language and your terminology has just been conditioned all day [at my other job]. And I walk poolside and all of a sudden, I can't say [certain words or swear words]. You know what I mean? You have to suddenly...you basically switch on and switch off. Now I've learnt to control that.

As a martial arts White male coach, Chris coached many athletes of different ethnicities which had implications for how he related to and communicated with his female athletes. During the interview, he admitted he struggled with the correct terminology to use when discussing female athletes of different ethnicities with other coaches and that the course had highlighted that he needs to address what could be discriminatory ways of describing others:

There are certain things where you think, oh I don't know if I should say that or not. Whereas like an hour ago, I'd have said it, it's just the way it is. But then [the workshop leader] pointed out that you can also go too far. Sometimes you might have to explain to somebody, if you're describing a person, at some point, you're going to have to say they're male or female, you're going to have to say if they're brown if they're white or black or whatever... Now so long as you're describing that person in a way that isn't a derogatory fashion ... Now when he said that, I was like, do you know, I never thought of that really.

Karen believed she already possessed an up-to-date understanding of equitable language because she had received similar education before and through her own coaching experiences of working with athletes with disabilities. To this end, she believed the course reinforced what she already knew and she practiced inclusive and equitable communication with her athletes. As a woman, she had often felt isolated within her coaching career but did not feel the course touched on these sorts of issues. However, it had served as a useful reminder and refreshed her current knowledge of communicating with athletes unlike herself (white, middle class, able-bodied) while reinforcing, in her mind, what she believed she already practiced:

I think it probably hasn't changed anything, but I would say it probably makes you think about it a little bit more or kind of put something in your head that okay, yeah, you kind of need to remember that or just sort of, I suppose... for an instance, like potentially if somebody was epileptic, then you have to call things seizures I suppose as opposed to fits now... [but] I would say I probably had a better understanding than [other coaches in the room].

For all of the coaches, the consensus was that as a consequence of attending the workshop, they all had an increased appreciation of the impact of the language they use as coaches. For Robert, he coached mostly young Muslim male and female athletes. Being White, he had felt in the minority in the club, something he has noticed and often struggled with in his relations with his athletes having started in the sport when it was, in his words, 'White and middle class'. These relations had brought about a sense of ontological anxiety for Robert

who through going from being in the majority to the minority, often questioned his often unequal power relationships with his Muslim male players. Through the equity course however, he understood with greater clarity that some terminology that he has used in his coaching may seem trivial whilst coaching but the impact on the athlete may be significant:

[Our area] has a strong Muslim community, and that gives very interesting and specific challenges... There's a very, very strong male dominance, a sort of patriarchy in that society, and it produces some very interesting scenes in a mixed coaching group. You get extraordinary deference from the girls and extraordinary assertiveness from the boys. It's their culture, and there's a real equity challenge there.... I find myself in a little bit of a minority... [These workshops] are... a reminder that you're probably not as fair and enlightened as you think you are, or you might benefit from the odd reminder. You might have relaxed into that comfort zone of thinking you're an ideal coach, and you need from time to time a little bit of a jolt to make you pay attention again. I think I'm more careful over my vocabulary. I do not intend to cause offence, but I recognise that's not enough. It's not only to do with intent; it's effect as well, and I'm a bit more careful.

Robert believed he was more aware of how he interacted and communicated with his players from Muslim backgrounds on the understanding that language conveys cultural beliefs and values, in this case, towards individuals from different ethnicities (Krane, Waldron, Michalenok, & Stiles-Shipley, 2001). Chris too was unaware of the origin of some racially discriminatory language. Before the workshop he was not aware of the term 'equity' but subsequently was still unable to define what the broader terms equity, equality and diversity implied:

We did do some exercises where we had to ...we took various descriptive words and we had to split them up into three groups: one where it was acceptable, where it's completely not acceptable and one where we didn't know if it was acceptable or not. And that was a bit of an eye-opener.... I did learn some stuff about where some of these things (words) came from. So I suppose it heightened my awareness. Like I've never really heard of equity before. I sort of

had an idea what it meant but actually what it means, I can't remember what it was and that but, what I thought it meant, it wasn't actually what it meant.

The workshop appeared to raise considerable awareness of how the coaches communicated with their male and female athletes and other coaches, something that the male coaches interviewed, had deemed trivial prior to attending or had not even before considered. With male domination of the profession, this may afford a level of privilege so that coaches, such as Robert, Stuart and Chris, do not question or problematise themselves within their day-to-day experiences. This was the biggest impact of the 'equity in your coaching workshop' in educating the coaches as to the importance of positive and inclusive language when working with 'others'.

This section presented the consensus of the four coaches that the strength of the equity training they had received was in highlighting and reiterating the need for them to update their use of terminology and language with their male and female athletes, from different ethnicities and abilities. The workshop had also taught the coaches that it is not always intent of language that is significant, but effect. As a consequence of this form of sociocultural education, the participant coaches understood more effectively and in more depth the impact of how they communicate with others. Language is an important cultural tool that communicates beliefs and values (Everett, 2013). Therefore, it is crucial that coaches are educated on their use of communication and the impact on their relationships with their different athletes. However, the coaches did not articulate what this meant for their practice and whether they had changed their language. For the coaches, it was difficult to see themselves in the course content, either through privilege or in the case of Karen, it did not address the complexities of her experiences, and so the course had limited impact.

## THE IMPACT OF THE COURSE ON BECOMING A MORE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Equity training, for all four of the coaches, was a novel course and offered an opportunity for them to reflect upon their coaching practices more broadly. The workshop,

according to Karen, Stuart, Robert and Chris, led them to often self-critique their coaching in a way they had not considered before. This was the other strength of equity training for coaches: the course had prompted the coaches to become more reflective at times, on their practices. As an older coach, Robert conceded that the terms 'equity, equality and diversity' were relatively new in relation to his coaching. He also admitted that as a practitioner, he had become 'set in his ways' and primarily focused on updating the technical element to his coaching rather than his relational expertise, particularly with his female athletes. The course had led him to be more mindful to mainstream notions of (gender) equity throughout his practice and to consider these issues at every stage. The following quote reveals the depth to which Robert reflected:

I found the whole experience very useful, a very useful reminder that this idea of fairness is the sort of thing that you need to concentrate on all the time and not think that you've cracked it and can move on to something else. You need to be aware. And sometimes...You become a spectator of other people's unfairness and you don't ever see the beam in your own eye...I think particularly for me I needed that to be reminded about what I was doing and why I was doing it, and to be warned off some of the things that I might have been tempted to do.

For Stuart, Chris and Karen, they had been unable to identify or recognise inequality in their day-to-day coaching relations and contexts. This is an important consequence of equity training for coaches. It is insufficient to assume that coaches can challenge inequitable practices and inequality because very often, coaches are unable to identify such incidents when they occur. This is in part to how sporting organisations have historically constructed equality; seeing it as issues of access and opportunities for marginalised groups. Translated by the coaches, this was taken to mean whether they make their sessions open to those unlike themselves, rather than how the power within sport has been white and male and how this has served to systematically exclude 'others'. Certainly for Stuart, he had not considered how equity can affect this coaching, prior to attending the workshop:



Maybe I'm blinkered and I don't realise it. Perhaps I'm not noticing it. But...I never considered some of the things [the tutor] brought up.

For Karen, as a national coach and at a level where she would be considered a 'master coach', she had participated in a sustained programme of coach education. Nevertheless, it was this particular course that led to her becoming more reflective of her role and to consider her practices in terms of equity:

I would say it probably makes you think about it a little bit more or kind of put something in your head that okay, yeah, you kind of need to remember [equity].

For three of the coaches, Chris, Stuart and Karen, they agreed that the worth of the course was in reminding them to become more reflective of their practices. At the same time, the agreement between them was that while the course was a worthwhile refresher and reminder, it only reinforced that how they were currently practicing was already equitable; they believed they were already 'doing equity' in their coaching. For example, Chris, as a coach to World Championship athletes in his sport and having attended many coach education courses, he asserted that he felt knowledgeable and confident in his coaching practice. As a white, able-bodied man too, he occupied a privileged perspective. Therefore, while the course was a 'refresher', it did not present any novel knowledge but rather endorsed his current coaching styles:

It's just that I have got a lot of experience of coaching and when you've been doing for 10 years, you tend to...you learn something eventually. So, it was kind of a refresher more than actually teaching something I didn't know. [But] It made me think a lot, at the time....But it got me thinking. I was quite pleased 'cause most of what I do is within the bounds of where you need to be.

It appears the case that for three of the more experienced coaches, that the course made them consider and reflect on their role more often but that this thinking did not translate into 'doing' because they felt their practices were already equitable. This was a surprising finding

because, paradoxically, during the interviews with Karen, Stuart, Robert and Chris, the coaches could not define the meaning of the terms equity, equality and diversity. Yet, Stuart contended the course confirmed what he was doing in his coaching was equitable:

I think [the course has] refined it. [But] I think I had a pretty good [grasp anyway]... I think my understanding of it has been refined. But I think I went there with a pretty good idea anyway... I've got the back up now in my head that I know I'm right.

This quote from Stuart may be evidence that reflection on his practices translated into more of a rationalisation and reaffirmation of what he was doing was already equitable, rather than challenging his thinking and changing the way he coached (Cushion, 2016). Instead, reflection is often conceived as a logical process with measurable, discernible outcomes and a changed system of knowledge (Edwards, Jones, & Viotto Filho, 2016). Karen appeared to support this view that the course was a useful refresher for her but reflecting through it did not present any new knowledge:

I don't think I came away with anything more, I don't think I learnt, it sounds a bit bad... all the refreshers are good because it kind of brings it back into your mind and puts everything back into your mind, but...there wasn't anything that I hadn't done before shall we say?

The broader value of the equity training course appeared then, for these coaches, to be a general reminder to be more reflective in how they plan and deliver their coaching. In its current form, it could be suggested that equity training for coaches may have limited impact beyond acting as a 'refresher' if organisations continue to underpin their coach education from an ideological position of 'creating equal opportunities'. By doing so, it does not require (male) coaches to consider their privileged position. The experiences of the coaches also provide some evidence that just because coaches reflect on social issues; it does not mean that this will lead to a change of practice. This problematises reflection as a tool to challenge and change practitioners' cultural assumptions and values (Cushion, 2016). A criticism could be of the workshop is that coaches were asked to reflect or relate the content to the context of their practice without consideration of who they themselves are within this process

(Cropley, Miles, & Peel, 2012) or the consequences of well-intended coaching (Fendler, 2003), a crucial element missing if it is to be understood how coaches play a role in making sport more or less equitable.

## MINIMAL IMPACT ON COACHING PRACTICE

During the interviews with the coaches, it was asked whether that as part of the equity training they had undergone, their coaching practices had changed and if so, how. The course explicitly aimed to provide coaches skills and strategies to adapt their practice to make their sessions more engaging and inclusive for marginalised groups (Sports Coach UK, 2009). Only Robert replied that he changed how he often organises and delivers his coaching. He described experiencing difficult gender relations with his young Muslim athletes because of gender and ethnicity power relations. Mainly as a consequence of the equity training he had received, Robert had since challenged this and had changed how he integrated his male and female athletes:

The presumption among the boys that they were superior and deserved more attention and more leeway, and the extraordinary deference and quietness of the girls, I hadn't reckoned on that, and I found the coaching course a great encouragement to try and redress that balance...[But now] I don't just let them do what they want to do, which might be one interpretation of fairness...Well I might at one stage have let them do that in the interests of peace and harmony, but that wouldn't be fair...So I drive them a little more than I might otherwise have done. I still allow them to play in segregated groups, but I encourage them to play in mixed groups.

Robert was the only coach out of the four that articulated how this learning had impacted his coaching practice and provided examples as testament to this change. The lack of influence of coach education on coaches' practice was a finding in previous research by Piggott (2012) and Cushion and Nelson (2013). As more experienced coaches, Stuart, Karen and Chris deemed the course largely irrelevant, in its current form, for coaching practice. This is

evidence that coaching experience can be a stronger, more influential source of learning than what was provided in the workshop, a finding that agrees with previous work around experiential learning and coach education (Cushion, 2001; Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003; Gilbert & Trudel, 2001). This is relevant to issues of equity, equality and social justice. Equity training should challenge coaches. Such education needs to move away from simple distinctions of gender and difference, from access and opportunity, to a deeper investigation of how gender dynamics and power in organisations connect to the underlying causes and structure of sporting inequality. It should reiterate the message and get coaches to explore what matters to them, the options they develop, and the choices they make as rooted in their positions in their organisations as well as their individual dispositions (Kolb & McGinn, 2009). The consequence is that what coaches often learn on such workshops does not always translate into practice. In the case of the present study, this may be because of how the terms equity, equality and diversity are presently defined by sporting organisations and policy makers. During the course, these terms were translated to mean making sport more accessible, fair and inclusive. However, for the coaches, as previously discussed they believed they were already operationalising such concepts in that they do not deny individuals access to their coaching or exclude any athletes from participating. To this end, three of the coaches deemed equity training irrelevant and had little impact on practice, as Chris illustrates:

It didn't affect me because I was already doing it and I would always [do it]. That's the way I was. I sort of...out of the three courses that I've done in the last six months, the equity, the coaching disabled and the child protection... most of it, probably 80%, 85% of what those courses were telling us, to me, was like yeah, obviously. Why would you not do that? Do you know what I mean? I'm not trying to be arrogant.

Through his experience gained from 12 years of coaching, Chris believed he did not need any further sociocultural coach education but his description of what he would like from an educational perspective highlights an important contradiction:

I personally don't see the point that I need more equity training because I've already got a view that everybody is the same anyway. I really don't see the point. I don't understand these differences.... in terms of do I actually feel I need to do anything more on equity? Probably not...I'd like to do something where I can learn more about maybe specific religions and see if there's ways of tying in their beliefs so that they could train...? [I need a course to] give you more ideas of how you can link it in, link people's beliefs into what you do. Although, again, I sort of struggle a bit [with that element of coaching].

While Chris strongly stated he felt equity training was irrelevant for his practice, at the same time, he felt he needed more education on how to manage the complexities and intricacies of the coach-athlete relationship when working with women from different religious backgrounds. The current equity course clearly did not answer that problem that presents itself in his' coaching. This is because, presently, equity and equality are defined as access and fairness, not as relationships or social practices which are important within Chris' coaching practice as a white man coaching women of different ethnicities. If this narrow conceptualisation of such terms persists, this education will also continue to be seen as irrelevant by coaches like Stuart, who failed to how such notions apply to his coaching within a rural club. This then suggests that coach education, as well as relevant, must also be tailored and applicable:

I think the first thing they ever explained to us was the difference between equity, equality and equal rights...I probably thought they were all one and the same. I think it's almost a little bit insulting to think that people don't do that anyway... I think sometimes when you go on these courses, they are...it's just a little bit teaching you to suck eggs. You think, well, why should you have to tell me to speak to people in that way? Because I would do that naturally... but it wasn't a revelation. It was almost [boring].Because we're a rural club, we don't have some of the issues, possibly, that you might get... in other areas... [The NGB] said that we had to have a structure whereby we had to have a percentage of ethnic people as part of our club structure...I thought, well, if people want to come along and join the Committee, there was never any barriers or boundaries to that. But I found that almost insulting, that they were

telling us that we had to have people from different backgrounds [in the club]... It's sport. Why does it matter?

Like Stuart, Karen described the workshop as largely irrelevant for her coaching because the notions of equality and rights had little application:

To be fair I don't think it's changed at all [my practice]... I'm going to say, [it] didn't change what I thought about it (equity) at all...I suppose most people know about fairness in sport or everybody's got equal access... so from the course, as I say, it didn't really change anything from before to after.

The participants' experiences suggest that this component of coach education in its present form, it is too often abstract, simplistic, and irrelevant to be of use to these coaches. In the interviews with the coaches, the participants often appeared detached from what they defined as equity. Their struggles to connect what they had learnt in the equity workshop to their professional practices illustrate how such issues are not always effectively answered or managed by the workshop organisers and leaders. Sociocultural education for coaches in the UK, according to the stories of Robert, Karen, Stuart and Chris, does not fundamentally challenge coaches' to re-examine their beliefs, values and practices. It requires coaches to just examine how they set up their coaching but does not go beyond this to ask them to address who they or their belief systems towards and relations with 'others'. Existing research suggests that coaches want educational programmes that can make a direct impact on their ability to practice (Nelson, Cushion, & Potrac, 2013). In the present study, while coaches gained more knowledge from attending equity training, the format was not always conducive (described as only briefly touching on issues and at times, inaccurate) and the coaches deemed it had limited impact on practice. The limited influence of UK coach education for how it is currently packaged is a common finding within previous research (Chesterfield et al., 2010; Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2004; Lyle, 2007). Equity training for coaches, as highlighted in the present study, in its current form does not always satisfy what coaches need to be able to manage the complex equity issues within their practice. Blundell

and Cunningham also documented UK coaches' frustrations at some aspects of the sociocultural education they received that failed to deal with the realities of their profession (Blundell & Cunningham, 2007). The findings of the present study also echo the work of Nelson, Cushion and Potrac (Nelson et al., 2013) in demonstrating the disjuncture between what providers of coach education define as important coaching knowledge and what the practitioners they work with actually want and need. In this case, there is a disparity between what coach education providers think coaches need towards 'doing equity' to what practitioners experience in their everyday coaching contexts. The following findings suggest the format of the workshop also needs to alter for it to have any effect on how coaches work.

#### FORMAT OF THE WORKSHOP: INAPPLICABLE AND UNINSPIRING

As part of the interviews, Karen, Stuart, Robert and Chris were all asked for their perceptions as to the content of the workshop. All four of the coaches had undergone the training in four separate English counties but all participants described similarities in the content and set up of the course. Their responses to the structure and substance of the workshop were also very similar: the coaches reported the equity training they received for the most part, inapplicable or irrelevant to their coaching practice, and all spoke of the persistent sense of apathy towards this topic as part of their and other coaches' professional development.

In the previous section of the findings, it was found that the coaches spoke of how the equity training they had received had minimal impact on their practice. This could be in-part accounted for by the perceived irrelevancy of some of the issues discussed in the workshop. For Robert, this was because at times, he questioned the accuracy of the issues discussed:

There were some comments made with which I might have argued, because I thought they were factually wrong. I didn't argue with all of them. I thought that in the ad-libbing, in the

sort of ebb and flow of that sort of seminar, some of the commentary could have been more carefully controlled, because I strongly disagreed with it.

Despite Robert's doubts as to the knowledge of the tutor, he did not openly challenge his ideas, a finding that is similar in the research of Cushion et al. (2003) and Piggott (2012). Robert, as an inexperienced coach, did not openly question the dominant knowledge of the tutor. This was not because Robert assumed the tutor knew more or best or that he doubted himself, unlike the coaches in the research of Piggott (2012). But rather, he presented as a 'docile body' (Lukes, 2005), feeling too inexperienced in his role as a coach in front of the tutor who was a former high profile professional male footballer. Status is one mechanism by which cultural authority is established (Piggott, 2012). In the case of Chris as a more senior, experienced coach he struggled to recount much of the course content because he did not find that it applied to his coaching:

We discussed sort of male/female stuff. There was a black guy on the course. We did a lot of that sort of thing with regards to how people viewed different skin colour. I think we did a little bit on religion but I don't seem to remember it was that much. But the burkha thing did come up...That sort of came up when we did discuss that at some point. Do you know, this is really bad. I'm really struggling to remember everything we did on that course?

To be irrelevant to the point of unmemorable will have implications for whether coaches take what they have learnt to translate into practice. During the interview with Stuart, he frequently questioned the current format of equity training for coaches because of the some of the issues discussed he felt did not apply to his situation as a coach of mostly young athletes:

I cannot see what someone's sexuality has got to do with absolutely anything. It's totally irrelevant isn't it? I don't see why that would make you a better athlete if [the coach knew about their sexuality]...or ...I don't see ...and I can't see that.



From the accounts of the coaches, it was at times as though the course and the resources had constructed a 'them' and 'us' situation. The coaches were not asked to address who they are in the coaching process. Instead, the course focused on 'others', such as 'underrepresented groups', namely, those with a (dis)ability or Black and Minoritised Ethnic participants. Stuart wanted some form of guidance around managing gender relations following some issues that he had experienced in his club. Yet, gender was not discussed in any depth during the workshop:

It wasn't really anything much based on gender. It didn't seem to me to be whether you were trying to encourage more males or females...it seemed to be more about the inclusion of disabled and ethnic minorities I would guess...apart from the thing where they put up these names that you can't call people or terms that you can use. She didn't really push [the subject of gender].

However, it was Stuart's opinion that the culture of sport is too embedded and set in its ways to change to become more equitable and thus the workshop was an empty gesture:

It's one thing there [in the workshop]. It's another thing when you're back in the workplace trying to implement it against some very rigid, sometimes, people that don't see the things that you want to try and do or whatever, isn't it? ... I've probably done more courses than anyone down [at my club]. So I like to think I've probably got the better edge on the modern thinking on things. Cause some of them are a little bit kind of, not stuck in yesteryear, but they don't see the progression of how things change.

Not only was the workshop experienced often as irrelevant but the coaches also described the course as uninspiring, particularly for the other coaches in the workshop. The consensus was that there was a palpable sense of apathy within the room. For Stuart, even the workshop leader appeared reluctant:

You've got a room full of...probably about 15 people. There were people there that, quite clearly, didn't have as much an idea and wanted to sort of sit quietly and not get involved... And nobody else from my club has been on [the course] or would want to go on it... The lady

that took the course...she sort of said, from the start...“I know you’ve all dragged yourself out here tonight and you don’t want to be told that you’ve got to say this and do this.”... you know, you could hear comments behind [me]. And I sort of looked round and you could see facial expressions at times and you thought, some people need a bit more educating than others.

In Karen’s case, by her own admission, she attended the course only because at the time it was a mandatory requirement for coaches within her club. She also experienced the sense of apathy from the other coaches at the course:

A lot of the people there; that’s the reason why they were there [as part of the Clubmark award] and that’s what they said, the reason they were there was because they needed it for club mark... and the two lads from cricket, they didn’t know that their sport did no longer need it...so they were like “oh well we’re here for nothing really”, and I’m like “well are you here for nothing or to be fair? Aren’t you going to learn something anyway or maybe it could help you somewhere along the line?”

The case of other coaches attending the course only because of mandatory requirements was also the situation for Stuart:

I think there were quite possibly people there...they’d almost been made to go there and they just had to sit in a room for three hours and leave. And they weren’t really listening or ... it was like trying to get blood out of a stone, trying to get answers out of some people. [The workshop leader would] ask them a question and they’d go “Ah....don’t know”.

This underlying sense of disinterest and reluctance from other coaches and for the coaches interviewed as well as the perception that they found parts of the course unmemorable could be grounded in questions over whether the course, in its current form, is sufficiently relevant for coaching practices. If coaches are expected to be agents of social inclusion then their education and training must be applicable, practical and based on ‘real-life’ scenarios. In the case of these coaches, the subsequent impact on coaching practice was minimal because of a number of factors. First, that because of how sporting organisations currently define equity, equality and diversity relates little to the coaches’ professional experiences. In this way,

these coaches believed they were already 'doing' equity if such a term meant fairness and access. Second, the impact on practice was minimal because the content of the workshop was, at times, too abstract and not grounded in the realities of what it means to coach. This would explain the apathy of the participant coaches, as well as the other coaches that attended, towards the workshop. To this end, the activities and message of the workshop were not deemed wholly relevant to coaching practice. Consequently, equity training for coaches does not set up coaches to deal with the complexities of the 'everyday' issues that may arise, a common criticism of coach education in the UK more broadly (e.g. author, 2012, 2013; Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2009; Edwards et al., 2016; Jones, 2007; Potrac, Jones, & Armour, 2002).

## **Conclusion**

This study illuminated how coaches experience equity training, in its current form, within the UK and its impact on themselves as practitioners and their practices. Precisely, it examined whether the impact of this type of coach education, ideologically informed by how the educational provider framed equality, stimulated coaches to (re)evaluate their conception of equity issues, and whether it challenged or reproduced their practice towards making their work more equitable. The findings, based on the voices of practitioners themselves, demonstrated that the course informed coaches as to the appropriate language and terminology to use in their relations with others and prompted the coaches in becoming more reflective of themselves as professionals. The training also raised awareness around issues of equity that the coaches had never identified or prioritised previously within their practice. However, beyond prompts, reminders and awareness raising, there was little evidence that the coaches had taken what they had learnt from the workshop to inform their own practice. Experience was shown to be a powerful mediator of knowledge with Karen, Chris and Stuart as the more experienced coaches largely dismissing the content and structure of the equity training. Only Robert, a less experienced coach, spoke more positively of the workshop and provided examples of how his coaching had changed following the course. All four coaches

described the complexity of their own contexts; the intricacies of the various relationships with their different athletes mediated by ethnicity, social class, gender and (dis)ability. But it was evident that the equity training did not relate to the coaches' contexts nor demonstrate that sport can often be a system of inequality that functions beyond their own environments.

The contribution of the present study is in highlighting the weaknesses of the conceptualisation of equity as access and legislation and the subsequent limited impact on coach learning and practice. It is vital to address sociocultural education for coaches in a form that is relevant, relatable and in-depth enough to challenge coaches to consider those parts of their practice they often perform unconsciously (Cushion, 2016). Equity, equality and diversity in coaching should be predicated on the principle of social justice and on an ethic of care (Bergmann Drewe, 2000; Singleton, 2012). This is the value of a feminist approach; going beyond just a critique of women's position in sport but extending to a critique of how the symbols, power base and intellectual apparatus of organisations (such as coach educational resources) serve to construct and maintain male privilege. It is suggest that equity should be considered from the perspective of an ethic of care, one that highlights responsibilities and a web of social relationships (Singleton, 2012). Sociocultural education for coaches should highlight relationships and responsibilities to encourage coaches to develop moral behaviour and foster the creation of equal, positive relations between individuals and groups (Singleton, 2012) . Equity training for coaches needs to adopt the approach that gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, (dis)ability and other social categories are not just add-ons of an individual's identity but are relations of power and set of social practices. Sporting organisations too need to move on from addressing just the barriers and facilitators to the recruitment of a more diverse sporting and coaching population, to interrogating the social order within sport and how it is maintained by certain social practices that originate in unequal social relations (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). This will require a more in-depth, reflective examination by organisations and a willingness by individuals to enact a new vision of gender equity (Shaw & Slack, 2002).

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